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PROVISIONAL SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 31st MEETING

Held at Headquarters, New York,
on Friday, 17 July 1992, at 3 p.m.

President: Mr. AMAZIANE (Morocco)
(Vice-President)

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In the absence of the President, Mr. Amaziane (Morocco), Vice-President, took the Chair.

The meeting was called to order at 3.15 p.m.

OPERATIONAL ACTIVITIES FOR DEVELOPMENT (continued) (A/47/264-E/1992/71, E/1992/64, E/1992/73, E/1992/98, E/1992/L.23)

Mr. KOBAYASHI (Japan) wondered how the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) could justify the choice of the six particular ex-Soviet republics where field offices were to be opened in the light of a decision of the Governing Council six weeks before stating that priority should be given to countries whose per capita income was lowest and whose programme resources were highest. His delegation had inquired about the matter earlier but had not yet received a clear answer. It raised the issue of how serious UNDP was about implementing the decisions of its own Governing Council. He was making this statement for the record; his delegation intended to ask for an informal meeting on the subject.

Mr. BARNETT (United Kingdom) repeated his two questions from the previous meeting regarding what efforts the United Nations funds and agencies, especially those without decentralization mechanisms, had made to delegate responsibilities to the country level, and to what extent there had been an attempt to speed up the decision-making process where decentralization was not possible.

Mr. SORENSEN (International Labour Organisation) said that, in addition to the internal reforms pursuant to resolution 44/211 mentioned at the previous meeting, multidisciplinary teams were being established whose make-up varied with the needs of the various subregions and with their technical competence, the object being to enable the International Labour Organisation (ILO) to emphasize programme-level services and bring its technical capabilities closer to its constituents. The division of

(Mr. Sorensen, ILO)

responsibilities between field and headquarters was changing; field offices were being given the main responsibility for close consultation with Governments, workers and employers.

Mr. KITATANI (United Nations Population Fund) said, with respect to training, that the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) had taken part in the Turin management coordination workshops held under the auspices of the Consultative Committee on Substantive Questions (Operational Activities) (CCSQ (OPS)) and would continue to support follow-up steps in that area, particularly with regard to field training for integrated programming at the national level.

UNFPA had initiated a new successor support cost arrangement, accompanied by a training plan. Guidelines had been prepared explaining the role of all partners in operational activities and would be useful as training material. UNFPA would organize periodic workshops on substantive subjects for technical support staff working within the new technical support cost arrangement.

With respect to decentralization, UNFPA had in 1988 adopted a policy of accelerated decentralization to field offices, including delegation of authority within specified limits, with mechanisms to ensure accountability. The benefits of that exercise had been clear and the problems minimal. Governments had been favourable to increased decentralization, and there would be a positive impact on national execution.

Mr. WATT (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations), speaking also on behalf of the Inter-agency Support Cost Task Force, said that the new arrangements on support costs were the result of a long collaboration between the task force and UNDP. They were necessarily complex, but everyone in the specialized agencies fully accepted the intent of the legislation, which was to reduce their administrative overhead.

As a result of the new arrangements, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) had lost a number of technical staff, mainly short-term assistants, whom national staff had replaced to some extent; there was, however, a net loss to its programmes. The arrangements had come into effect on 1 January 1992, but resident representatives had had the option, until 1 July, of approving projects under the old or the new regime.

(Mr. Watt, FAO)

The result had been that hundreds of projects had been approved under the old, and fewer than five under the new, which was admittedly quite experimental. The new arrangements had, however, arisen from deliberations of the General Assembly and the Council begun more than three and a half years before. If they were not put more fully into practice, the number of technical support programmes would likely be maintained in 1992, but drop off sharply in 1993 and 1994. Though it was premature to do a full evaluation of the situation, the Council and General Assembly should make a preliminary assessment at the 1992 triennial comprehensive policy review of operational activities. It would thus be possible to streamline the arrangements and ensure that the intent of the legislation was followed.

Mr. MATTHEWS (United Nations Development Programme) said that UNDP would follow a policy of strategic decentralization, retaining accountability at headquarters while detailed implementation of programming was decentralized to the country level.

A proposal had been made for an "enhanced division manager": the field office would have a single contact within the headquarters secretariat to answer questions, give guidance, and find solutions to problems arising at the country level. The proposal had generated much debate. The intent was to bring the decision-making process much closer to the programming process at that level. An action committee would review all projects of more than a billion dollars and all national programmes supported by UNDP; once the programmes had been assessed, further consideration of their component projects would be given at the country level.

Mr. DEMONGEOT (United States of America) said that his delegation would like to see the new arrangements implemented expeditiously. UNDP and agency staff should receive proper training. He had noted that many resident representatives did not know the difference between national execution and government execution, which gave no role to agencies.

The resident coordinator should carry out, first, his own duties, and only then - if there was not enough work for two - those of the UNDP resident representative. UNDP, as the central United Nations funding mechanism, was a very important component of the development system, and its resident

(Mr. Demongeot, United States)

representative should have a system-wide orientation, but the primary role of the resident coordinator should be to represent the system as a whole.

Mr. ALTESMAN (United Nations Children's Fund) said, with respect to decentralization, that different organizations had different structures, often, though not always, for good reason. Those structures were relevant to the way in which better coordination was brought about.

A case in point was the relationship between the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the World Health Organization (WHO), which was like a marriage; no two organizations were closer, and UNICEF did nothing of import without the close cooperation of WHO. And yet, their structures could not be more different. WHO had a strong headquarters and a very strong regional level, with fewer staff at the country level. At UNICEF, in contrast, 85 per cent of the staff were at the country level. Its headquarters staff for all of Latin America consisted of three people, and another three were responsible for the entire Middle East. Decision-making authority was at country level, and the three people in New York were less senior than those in the field.

Such factors needed to be taken into account in restructuring the United Nations system; decentralization should proceed expeditiously, but it was important to be aware of how the structures might support it.

Ms. ASHRAF (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) said that the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) had been following a policy of decentralization for a number of years and was currently implementing further decentralization measures recommended by a recent independent study. Field units had full power to delegate authority and UNESCO regional offices were increasingly participating in inter-agency activities at the field level. She cited figures to show the extent of decentralization within UNESCO, but conceded that there was still room for improvement and noted the evaluation of regional units and field offices currently under way and scheduled for completion in 1992, when UNESCO would be able to report back to the Council on its outcome.

The PRESIDENT said that some agencies were reluctant to draw conclusions on the new agency support arrangements as they had only been in force since January 1992, while others had argued that, according to preliminary evaluations, the arrangements were leading to a loss of technical capabilities in the field. He wondered whether representatives of the agencies could clarify their views on the matter.

Mr. SORENSEN (International Labour Organisation) said that no formal review was being called for but that the agencies were merely expressing a common concern that efforts must be made to ensure that the new arrangements were properly understood and worked effectively. In his view, the key element of the new policy thrust was to strengthen the technical capacities of agencies while disinclining them from an unnecessary involvement in administrative work, and he noted that the opportunities for the technical involvement of agencies were significantly increased under nationally executed projects.

The PRESIDENT wondered if the representative of FAO could explain whether there was any connection between the new arrangements and the reported loss of technical capabilities in the field.

Mr. SORENSEN (International Labour Organisation) said, with reference to the reported loss of technical capabilities, that care must be taken to ensure that reductions in the number of resident experts in the field did not lead to a concomitant reduction in the capacity of agencies to provide substantial technical services in the context of UNDP-financed programmes.

Mr. TAL (United Nations Development Programme) said, to supplement information provided earlier by the representative of FAO and in response to questions raised by the United States, that the Governing Council of UNDP had determined that the new support costs regime would only come into force when US$ 500 million of fifth-cycle resources had been committed against the old regime and that projects could continue to be approved under the old regime, provided their preparations were sufficiently advanced. Consequently, with very few exceptions, the old regime had remained in force until the end of June. For that reason, there could be no connection between any slow-down in delivery and the implementation of the new arrangements. As yet, insufficient

(Mr. Tal, UNDP)

experience had been gained of the new arrangements for any conclusions to be drawn and he noted that the Administrator of UNDP had been instructed to undertake an evaluation, in close cooperation with agencies.

UNDP believed that the key to the success of the arrangements lay in training and that it was therefore organizing an extensive programme to train both agency and government staff in their implementation. In 1993 a major training programme for all field personnel would be held, to ensure that the new arrangements were fully embedded in the United Nations operational system.

Mr. WATT (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations) said that, in view of the key importance of operational activities, it was essential for the Economic and Social Council to be kept fully informed of any experience in implementing the new arrangements and he therefore proposed that, while it would be premature to attempt a full-scale review of those arrangements at the General Assembly, some form of information session should none the less be organized.

The PRESIDENT welcomed the information on training measures provided by UNDP and noted the importance of including government representatives in such measures.

With reference to the suggested information session, he wondered whether any form of assessment could be undertaken, since the old arrangements had continued in force until so recently and their effects would therefore distort any picture provided of the new arrangements.

He also noted with approval that UNDP was considering a new arrangement whereby its country offices would have authority to approve project components. He hoped that the arrangement would be approved since, in his view, the delegation of responsibility for all project components to the resident representative would be of considerable benefit to the efficiency of the system as a whole.

Mr. MATTHEWS (United Nations Development Programme) said, in response to the comment by the President, that the system under consideration, which was already being put into effect, was an intermediate one between the former project-by-project approach and the approach of wholesale approval of entire country programmes. UNDP was not prepared to pass full authority for

(Mr. Matthews, UNDP)

approval of all programme components to the field level once a country programme had been approved. First, field representatives were invited to inform UNDP of the specific needs of the various areas of concentration, for the preparation of an overall assessment. Once that assessment had been completed and UNDP had fulfilled various policy requirements, authority could be passed to the country level for the subsequent approval of specific components.

From a schematic point of view, programming went through three stages. First, a country programme was considered, containing a broad indication of the national programmes for which UNDP support was proposed. Second, an initial national programme outline was developed, still at headquarters level, to ensure that the programme would be fully in line with the concerns of the governing body. Third, and finally, the individual components and projects were approved at the field level.

Mr. BARNETT (United Kingdom) agreed with the President that any attempt to evaluate the new system during the General Assembly, when it would effectively have been in operation for a mere three months, would be very difficult and, in view of the workload during the General Assembly, barely feasible. He therefore recommended that the secretariat might prepare a non-paper, summarizing the issues and the proposals made during the debate, and taking into account the context in which statements were made.

Mr. DEMONGEOT (United States of America) agreed with the representative of the United Kingdom that the workload under the triennial review precluded the preparation of another assessment, and suggested that, as an alternative, the UNDP secretariat might organize a consultation at some point later in the year, to review progress in implementing the new support cost arrangements.

Ms. JANJUA (Pakistan) said, with reference to the suggestions by the United Kingdom and the United States, that it would be more appropriate to organize merely an informal briefing on the support costs arrangements, rather than consultations in the context of the Economic and Social Council, which would be expected to lead to decisions.

Mr. MATTHEWS (United Nations Development Programme) said that a core group had been set up under UNDP on the subject of the new support costs. It would meet regularly to review experience in their implementation and could give briefings to members, as suggested by the representative of Pakistan.

Ms. JANJUA (Pakistan), speaking on behalf of the Group of 77, said that it had been the understanding of the Group that no non-paper would result from the discussions on support costs and that it would in any event be premature to attempt any kind of summary in 1992, the year of the triennial review, when the process had only just begun. Furthermore, a summary would be influenced by the views of the person presenting it, and the only acceptable record would, therefore, be a full verbatim record of all the deliberations.

Mr. BARNETT (United Kingdom) said that, in view of the opposition to his suggestion expressed by the representative of Pakistan on behalf of the Group of 77, he would like to withdraw the suggestion.

The meeting rose at 4.45 p.m.